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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM CONDITIONS IN HUE

REF: A. A) HCMC 266; B) HCMC 261; C) HCMC 248 AND PREVIOUS; D)

[1](#)B. 06 HCMC 1089; E)05 HCMC 623

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Religious freedom conditions in Central Vietnam's Thua Thien Hue conditions continue to gradually improve for the Catholic archdiocese and the small Protestant community. The decision of a house church group in the province to apply for registration under Vietnam's legal framework on religion reflects not only this local improvement, but a decision of its HCMC-based leadership to seek to legalize operations throughout the country. In contrast, conditions for the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV) in Hue remain difficult. The authorities continue to view the UBCV as a substantial threat. Recently they have moved aggressively to tighten movement restrictions on key Hue-based UBCV leaders and to counter UBCV efforts to appoint new leaders to strengthen its organization. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) During a visit to Hue on March 1 and 2, Embassy and ConGen PolOffs met with local government officials and religious leaders to assess developments in religious freedom in the province. Chairman of the Provincial Committee for Religious Affairs (CRA), Duong Viet Hong, stressed the province's commitment to implement Vietnam's legal framework for religion. He assured us that the approximately 605,000 Buddhists, 55,000 Catholics, 300 Protestants, and 200 Cao Dai followers who reside in the province are treated fairly. He acknowledged that the return of expropriated religious property and role of religious institutions in education remain unresolved challenges. The province still considers land expropriated from the Catholic Church and the Buddhists -- principally religious schools and hospitals -- as "contributions." He hailed Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung's recent meeting with the Vatican and hoped it would bring the Catholic Church and the government closer together.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The Hue CRA Chairman also said the province was looking forward to welcoming back Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh to Hue (Ref B). Hanh's visit to Vietnam is an example of the GVN's tolerant policy on religious freedom, he asserted. Hanh is welcome because he "shares the same religious belief" as other Buddhists in Hue.

[1](#)4. (SBU) The CRA Chairman noted that Protestantism has only a very modest footprint in the province. Of the 300 Protestants the CRA records in the province, 250 are affiliated with the GVN-recognized Southern Evangelical Church of Vietnam (SECV) in two churches. Another fifty

are affiliated with a number of house churches, including the Mennonites and the Seventh-Day Adventists. Although not yet registered, they can worship freely, the CRA Chairman stated. Hong noted that he has encouraged the house churches to register under the legal framework, but thus far they have opted not to do so because the provincial authorities allow them to worship regardless of their legal status.

"A Limit to Hue's Tolerance"

15. (SBU) Hong cautioned that the GVN is very strict when individuals violate Vietnamese laws by using religion as a front for political "extremism." Catholic priest Father Nguyen Van Ly is being pursued by police because of his political and not/not religious views, he claimed. (Ref A reports on Father Ly's indictment on charges of "propagandizing against the state.") Separately, officials from the Hue External Relations Office characterized both Father Ly as well as Thich Thien Hanh of the outlawed Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), as examples of political figures who are abusing their religious position to promote anti-government extremism.

The SECV's Ongoing Challenges in Hue

16. (SBU) In the presence of Hue ERO officials who insisted on attending our meeting, Pastor Dinh Van Tu, head of the SECV in Hue, reported that his church has a good relationship with the province. The Pastor, who took over the leadership role in Hue four months earlier, said that his small congregation -- he estimated 300 worshipers -- did not face any harassment. However, the SECV has requested that the Hue government return three expropriated SECV properties that are being using as public schools, but awaits a government reply. Pastor Tu also complained that SECV students attending Hue University had their off-campus Christmas gathering disrupted by police. He refused to

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discuss specifics in front of the Hue officials, noting with a smile, "you can go but we stay." Pastor Tu added that the problems the SECV faced were not with the CRA but with local police.

And Police Still Suspicious of House Churches

17. (SBU) When we entered the house of Pastor Nguyen Van Phai of the United Gospel Outreach Church (UGOC), he whispered that a police official was stationed in an adjacent building and that our conversation was being recorded. Pastor Phai was on edge and spoke in hushed voices. (When we met with the Pastor in 2005, police similarly were present.) Pastor Phai said that he planned to submit an application to register his church in the coming weeks and that his church's interaction with the local authorities has improved since the creation of Vietnam's legal framework on religion. His church has approximately 100 followers in Thua Thien Hue province and another 1,000 worshipers in neighboring provinces. The UGOC has four house churches in the province; all receive "the same level of attention from the police." He added cryptically that other members of the UGOC in Hue had hoped to attend our meeting, but "failed."

18. (SBU) In a follow-up cell phone conversation on March 22, Pastor Phai elaborated that, prior to the passage of the legal framework police harassment against his congregation was severe. Prayer services were frequently broken up police and congregants heavily fined or detained. Since March 2005, police have not intervened during services, nor have they harassed worshipers. Police do call on him occasionally to "review the church's

operations."

Hue Buddhists: UBCV and VBS On Separate Paths

¶9. (SBU) In the austere setting of his chambers at the Bao Quach Pagoda, we met in private with the Venerable Thich Thien Hanh (strictly protect), the senior-most member of the UBCV in Hue. Thich Thien Hanh began by condemning the police arrest of Father Ly. In his view, the persecution of Father Ly is part of an intensified nationwide GVN crackdown against political dissidents after the end of 2006 APEC Summit, the U.S. President's visit and Vietnam's entry into the WTO.

¶10. (SBU) The UBCV leader told us that he remains under de facto "pagoda" arrest, and noted that when the police moved against Father Ly, they also increased their presence around his pagoda. In September 2006, he was able to "escape" Hue to join UBCV Patriarch Thich Huyen Quang in Binh Dinh and accompany him to HCMC for medical treatment (ref D). Although his movements are restricted, he still can communicate with the Patriarch and with UBCV General Secretary Thich Quang Do in HCMC. He said that, on January

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25, approximately 1,000 police officials interrupted, but did not stop, a ceremony he was officiating to promote junior monks at the Phuoc Thanh Pagoda to positions in the UBCV's Youth Wing. However, in mid-March, Hue police stepped up their harassment of two Hue monks responsible for UBCV youth affairs -- Thich Le Cong Cau and Thich Chi Thang. The two UBCV members have been summoned for police interrogations virtually every day for the past week, UBCV contacts told us on March 23.

¶11. (SBU) Hanh said that the relationship between the UBCV and GVN-recognized Vietnam Buddhist Sangha (VBS) monks in Hue remains "good" and that "they talk," although he disapproves of VBS ties with the GVN. "We do not want the Communist Party to use Buddhism to promote itself, the UBCV leader said. Warming to the theme, Hanh added that Vietnam's 82 million people should not be under the control of "two million atheist Party members." Hanh said that he would support a merger with the VBS were the new organization outside the ambit of the Fatherland Front and the Party and were the GVN to pledge not to interfere in the internal affairs of the merged organization, including the educational curriculum of Buddhist acolytes.

¶12. (SBU) In contrast to the UBCV Patriarch who told the CG that he would meet with Thich Nhat Hanh (ref A), the Hue UBCV representative said that he will not/not meet the Zen Master when he returns to Hue at the end of March. (In 2005, Thich Tien Hanh was the only ranking UBCV member to meet with Thich Nhat Hanh.) The Hue UBCV representative said that Thich Nhat Hanh has grown too close to the GVN.

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¶13. (SBU) Venerable Thich Hai Anh, Deputy Chief of the Hue VBS and two assistants welcomed PolOfs to a brightly lit, open-air hall at the Tu Dam Pagoda and to a table laden with snacks and beverages. (The ERO insisted on sitting in on our meeting.) Anh described VBS operations in Hue as "independent" of the GVN. The VBS has "absolute freedom" to organize and worship in Hue and has maintained good relations with the GVN since 1975. (The VBS technically was created in 1981, following the "disbanding" of the UBCV.) In cooperation with the Hue Catholic Archdiocese, the VBS operates a health clinic that offers counseling and anti-retroviral medication to approximately 60 people living with HIV/AIDS. The VBS told us that it would welcome USG funding to expand the program. Anh told us that the VBS still has normal relations with Thich Tien Hanh, but has no "formal interaction" with the UBCV.

Unlike Thich Tien Hanh, the VBS is looking forward to close cooperation with Thich Nhat Hanh during his visit to Hue; the VBS is the Zen Master's official host.

The Catholic Church Pursues a Gradualist Approach

¶14. (SBU) Nguyen Nhu The, Archbishop of Hue, told us that the relationship between his diocese and its 55,000 Catholics and the Hue government is improving, despite the Father Ly incident. (Ref C reports on our conversation with the Archbishop on Father Ly.) The government does not prevent people from becoming Catholic and Catholics may now enter university. For Christmas 2006, the GVN finally permitted the diocese to send a priest to minister to the Catholic population in Quang Binh province, part of the Hue Archdiocese. In the past, priests have had to slip into Quang Binh illegally. The Archbishop also noted the ongoing cooperation with local authorities and the Hue VBS to offer services to people in the community with HIV/AIDS. According to the Archbishop, the Prime Minister's recent meeting with the Vatican will only serve to "open up a brighter future for Catholics and other religions."

¶14. (SBU) Problems remain, however. His diocese can only enroll ten students in the seminary every two years. The Archbishop has asked the GVN to increase that number to 40 and to allow more ordained priests, but thus far the government response has been negative. There has been no real movement on expropriated property, but the Archbishop espouses a gradualist, patient approach. His highest priority is for the GVN to fulfill the Church's request to get back land in La Vang, a Catholic pilgrimage in Quang Tri province. This issue, he told us, is of interest to the national Catholic Church, and not just the Hue diocese.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) During this visit, officials were far more insistent and persistent in accompanying us to non-government meetings than in previous visits, a reflection of a trend we are seeing throughout the Consular District and not an indication of backsliding on religious freedom issues. Overall religious freedom conditions in Hue continue to slowly move forward, although more needs to be done. It is encouraging that the Catholic Archdiocese is able to move forward with some work on HIV/AIDS -- following in the footsteps of the more extensive operation that the HCMC Archdiocese already has in place. The decision of the UGOC house church to move ahead with registration reflects not only improved conditions in Hue, but a decision by the national leadership of the organization based in HCMC to seek to legalize its operations throughout the country. Nonetheless, Hue is a conservative town, socially and politically. Its conservatism is reflected in continued police surveillance of the unregistered house church movement and the authority's sluggishness in approving routine requests from the Catholic Archdiocese.

¶16. (SBU) Comment Continued: Hue is one of the core centers of Buddhism in Vietnam. This visit reinforces our judgment that UBCV monks -- especially Thich Tien Hanh -- continue to be well respected in the Hue Buddhist community, but viewed as a serious threat by the authorities. As in ongoing cases of human rights violations against other UBCV leaders elsewhere in southern Vietnam, harassment against the Hue chapter of the UBCV is carefully calibrated and almost certainly centrally-directed. GVN pressure is focused at countering UBCV efforts to perpetuate and strengthen its organization.

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